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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA AND JUNE 29 ELECTIONS: PROGRESS ON

REFORM DEFINED BY PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM

REF: A. KUWAIT 2026 AND PREVIOUS
[1](#)B. 99 KUWAIT 3570
[1](#)C. 99 KUWAIT 3562
[1](#)D. 99 KUWAIT 3266

Classified By: CDA Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary and comment: The June 29 Kuwaiti parliamentary election campaign has commenced. Some observers will be tempted to use votes for women and reform candidates as a litmus test for the pace and success of political reform in the Gulf region. A more nuanced view is required. The grassroots activism and public debate that led to the constitutional dissolution of Parliament and call for new elections already demonstrate widespread support for further democratization and political reform in Kuwait. While election results may not yield substantial change for a variety of reasons -- election inexperience of women, lack of change in size and demographics of electoral districts, short campaign period, and strong organization skills of established groups -- change is underway in this conservative society. There are three overriding reasons for continued optimism in prospects for reform whatever the outcome of the June 29 vote: 1) the participation of women is challenging conservative social ideas, shaping campaign rhetoric, and forcing men to deal with women as political equals; 2) a grassroots pro-reform youth movement has emerged, erasing traditional political apathy and demonstrating the power and potential of political activism in Kuwait; and 3) the intense public debate over electoral reform has highlighted the problems of corruption and the need for reform.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) This optimism should be tempered with the realization that well-established interest groups will try to use the elections to either delay political reform or consolidate their own political power. There is also likely to be some degree of truth to allegations of corruption and Government intervention, though it is important to keep in mind that many of these accusations are politically motivated. With women participating for the first time, these elections represent a new era in Kuwaiti political life and it is important to assess the broader political environment and not focus solely on the outcome of a few high profile campaigns. As we report on the elections over the next three weeks, we will focus on what the campaigning and the outcome means for our Freedom Agenda. Finally, any election outcome is unlikely to have a direct impact on U.S.-Kuwaiti security cooperation, specifically continued support for OIF, and the GOK's close relationship with the United States will allow for continued engagement with the Government and civil society on the full range of reform issues. End summary and comment.

Kuwait's Election Mechanics

¶3. (SBU/NF) The June 29 parliamentary elections will be conducted on the basis of Kuwait's current 25 constituency electoral system. With the addition of female voters, there are an average of 13,600 voters per constituency, up from 5,500 when only men were allowed to vote. Those ineligible to vote include members of Kuwait's army and police, persons under 21 years of age, naturalized citizens who have held their citizenship for less than 20 years, and people living in areas outside the boundaries of the current electoral constituencies. Each voter can vote for two separate candidates; the electoral system is first-two-past the post. In the 2003 elections, voter turnout averaged 73 percent. In all, 386 candidates, including 31 women, have registered for the elections. Competition is intense; in some constituencies, as many as 29 candidates are competing for two seats, though this number is expected to drop as tribal primaries and other factors weed out candidates who have until June 25 to withdraw. Election results will be announced within 48 hours of polling stations closing. Per constitutional procedures, a new Cabinet must be formed after every parliamentary election. Thus, the sitting Cabinet must submit its resignation and a new Cabinet approved by the Amir within two weeks of the announcement of the election results. Few, if any, changes are expected in the new Cabinet. The new Parliament is expected to meet only once or twice in July before recessing for the summer.

¶4. (SBU/NF) There are no regulations on campaign financing in Kuwait, nor are there strict oversight procedures to ensure candidates do not misuse funds received (ref C). Campaign costs can be exorbitant as many candidates are expected to provide lavish buffets and refreshments to prospective voters at their campaign tents, in addition to

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the many banners and assorted paraphernalia they must purchase (septel). Most support is raised informally through familial, tribal, or religious networks, though many candidates also bear a considerable amount of campaign costs personally. Given the complete absence of regulatory oversight, allegations of fraud and corruption are widespread. Though few people can offer concrete proof of such corruption, there is certainly a measure of truth to their accusations. Despite this fact, most Kuwaitis see the elections as a legitimate, albeit somewhat flawed, means of voicing their political views, and accept the results, though there are inevitably some candidates who file lawsuits alleging misconduct on the part of their opponents.

Three Reasons for Optimism

¶5. (S/NF) There are likely be those who charge that, regardless of the outcome, these elections based on existing constituencies represent a step backwards for reform in Kuwait. This view misses the profound changes that have and are occurring in this conservative society. Although these elections are being held earlier than many pro-reformers hoped, there are three reasons for optimism. First, women's participation is having a profound impact on both the issues being discussed by voters and the strategies being adopted by candidates. There are subtle, but significant indicators of this impact. During a campaign rally, former Islamist MP Dr. Nasser Al-Sane, who voted against women's suffrage legislation in May 2005, brought his wife on stage to thank her for her support. In a meeting with female voters in his district, former Speaker of Parliament Jassem Al-Khorafi was asked directly why he voted against women's suffrage legislation when it was first introduced in 1999. Many liberal candidates, such as former Minister of Information Dr. Saad bin Teflah, are making women's issues a central element of their campaign platforms. Women's participation has also forced conservative, male candidates to develop strategies to reach female voters, such as creating women's

committees and separate female campaign tents. The election of a female candidate, which is highly unlikely, should not be viewed as the standard by which to measure the progress of reform in Kuwait. Rather, we should focus on the fact that women have emerged as a potent political force and are having a significant impact on election rhetoric; some are even openly and freely challenging conservative social values in Kuwait.

¶6. (S/NF) A second reason for optimism is the emergence of a grassroots reform movement. The diverse coalition of pro-reform youth organizations called the "orange movement" that united to press for electoral reform clearly demonstrated the power of political activism in Kuwait. In a large part, these elections are a result of their pro-reform, anti-corruption campaign. The fact that they so openly challenged the Government and directly accused top Al-Sabah ministers of fueling widespread corruption was a major breakthrough in Kuwait. As one pro-reform activist told Poloff, "This is our victory: we are no longer afraid to name names." While the orange movement may have trouble maintaining cohesion and momentum, it has nonetheless challenged traditional political apathy in Kuwait and through websites and blogs given young pro-reformers an outlet to openly express their political views. It has also made reform the central issue thus far of these elections. The fact that candidates are campaigning on a pro-reform platform and are pictured in banners wearing orange scarves is a testament to the influence of this grassroots pro-reform movement in Kuwait.

¶7. (S/NF) The third reason to be optimistic is that the intense public debate over electoral reform has highlighted the problems of corruption in Kuwait and the need for reform. Given the heightened public interest in this issue, there is a possibility that the next Parliament could be elected with a clear reform mandate. Already several former MPs have openly declared that if they are re-elected they will walk out of Parliament if the new Cabinet includes "corrupt" members of the previous Cabinet. This debate over reform is also likely to have an impact on the region as many in the Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia, watch the election process in Kuwait, specifically women's participation, with great interest. An example of how this impact could be felt is that Al-Jazeera Direct is planning to begin daily, 30-minute reports on the elections for broadcast around the region. A secondary effect of the reform debate has been an alliance between liberals and Islamists in support of political reform, the benefits of which each group hopes will accrue to them. Traditionally, these groups have been at

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odds with each other, but this tactical alliance could prove an important new political dynamic. Nonetheless, some liberal activists expressed to NEA A/S Welch during a June 2-3 visit to Kuwait skepticism at the sincerity of some Islamist politicians who joined ranks with the liberals. They said only time will tell how committed they are to reform. Still, there is cause to hope that the focus on reform will carry on into the next Parliament and even more broadly throughout the region.

But There Are also Issues of Concern

¶8. (S/NF) This optimism should be tempered with the realization that certain groups will try to capitalize on these elections to either delay political reforms or to increase their own political influence. Led by Energy Minister Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd Al-Sabah and other ruling family members with ambitions to succeed one day as ruler, some interest groups are likely to try to ensure the next Parliament is more amenable to the Government's interests and less unruly than the last one. This will be all the more important to them given the key legislation that is likely to be addressed during the next four years. Their efforts will

almost certainly include the dispensing of patronage to support loyal MPs. A second concern is that the next Parliament could include more Islamist MPs. Most contacts expect the women's vote to primarily benefit Islamists who are better able to influence and mobilize conservative female voters. The short campaign period is also likely to benefit Islamists who are better organized and funded than other groups. Nonetheless, the election of more Islamist candidates should not be immediately seen as a setback since most of them support political reform.

Post's Actions

¶9. (S/NF) Analyzing what these elections mean to the U.S. and to the region will drive our monitoring and reporting of electoral developments as they occur. To this end, we are attending nightly campaign rallies and meeting with a variety of contacts to hear their views on the election process, and the implications for reform. Our immediate focus will be on the potential impact of the elections on our Freedom Agenda. We will also concentrate on the role of women, the influence of Islamists, the ruling family's view of the elections, and the alliances between different political groups.

¶10. (SBU/NF) Post has also directed MEPI programming to support reforms during the campaign. Several projects to provide campaign advice and support to female candidates, and help youth groups to organize voter education campaigns are underway. In addition, MEPI funding will support a two-day seminar for journalists on covering elections.

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